

A STUDY OF WOMEN'S PLIGHT THROUGH THE MIRROR OF FICTION AND SCIENCE FICTION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

ADITI BANERJEE

Scholar, she is teaching English in a Govt Sponsored Higher Secondary School Shason Union
High School (H.S) in West Bengal as an Assistant Teacher, India

ABSTRACT

In *The Blind Assassin* Margaret Atwood has presented the life story of two sisters Iris and Laura Chase in the setting of Canadian society during the periods of First and Second World Wars to the present day. Simultaneously, in this novel she has incorporated a science fiction of the same name with which the novel is entitled. Through the narrative by Iris and by the science fiction written by Laura, Atwood has addressed the fate and plight of women in this patriarchal society. The bizarre characters from the science fiction symbolise and represent the characters of the principal plot.

KEYWORDS: Fiction, Science Fiction, Patriarchy, Juxtaposition, Society Etc

INTRODUCTION

The Booker prize winning novel of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood *The Blind Assassin* is radical with its panoramic view of women and their conditions, the contemporary Canadian society in the periods of First and Second World Wars to the present day intertwining the memoirs of the protagonist Iris Chase, the newspaper cuttings, and an apparently bizarre science fiction novel written by the younger sister of Iris- Laura Chase whose suicide initiates the tale of this baffling work. Interpreting Atwood's novel needs a kind of relentless effort as it can be interpreted from various perspectives from socio-political scenario to gender exploitation, from an enigmatic storytelling style to an ambiguous science fiction and a desperate effort from the part of a girl to question the conventional norms perhaps only to be doomed as in this patriarchal society surviving is synonymous to conforming to the social orthodoxy.

In the novel we get a vivid glimpse of Chase family living in Port Ticondaroga in their house 'Avilion'. Iris' grandfather owns a button factory and her grandmother Adelia controls all the household activities. The novel is not chronological in order. There are jumps in time and space. Not much action is there in the whole novel. It is totally based on contemplative ground and the actions are found only in the flashbacks. The picture of Iris and Laura as child, their chemistry, their life in Avilion in the supervision of Reenie, death of their mother and Laura's inquisitiveness about it when she was told the premature dead child was a grey kitten, Laura's brooding when their mother died, their relationship with their father who came back from war front, their mother's relation with their father, their father's relationship with other women and the teachers that used to teach them form the basis of Iris' memoir.

Iris was writing a memoir unfolding all of her life story and she was uncertain who would ever read this as she could never imagine herself to read it when she would be of very old age, though she did not know when she could be considered of being in old age because she had not seen any -not even her mother as she had never reached that age and died of child birth, or she could not even expect anyone reading this after her death. Perhaps she was writing this just as a child scrawl her name in the snow to fulfil her own desire.

The novel starts with the death of Laura around whom the mystery of both primary and secondary plot revolves. We feel quite baffled and curious too when the memoir of Iris her elder sister reveals the character of inquisitive, rebellious, unique Laura to us and we too like Iris question how such a girl met with an accident or whether it was a suicide or she had been murdered. Iris throughout her narrative tried to find answer to this question.

Position of women in society, family emerges as an important issue in *The Blind Assassin*. Muteness of women is always demanded, but the eloquence finds its shape in Laura as she always questions the conventional norms and regulations that women are generally bound to follow. Gender discrimination is clear in the submissiveness of Iris and Laura's mother who despite knowing her husband's multiple relations kept quite just to maintain peace in the family. Iris's father took hold of the Button factory after Iris's grandfather's death. He tried to maintain status of the factory. In the picnic held by the factory workers he gave inspirational speech. But finally he had to sacrifice her daughter in the marriage with Richard Griffen the wealthy industrialist as the factory was set on fire. Laura gave shelter to Alex Thomas whom she had met during that picnic and who was accused to set the factory on fire and she refused to reveal to the Police any information regarding Alex. She defiantly said even if she would know about him she would maintain reticence. Laura and Iris together provided everything for Alex's survival. Laura developed a feeling for Alex and there was a storm in the tea cup about it. Further, the complexity increases when Alex tried to be physically intimate with Iris when she was not prepared for the same but melted with the touch, it being the first touch of any man. Though finally Alex left and Laura and Iris helped him to escape.

Exploitation of female is shown when Laura was too young and exploited by their teacher appointed by their father and told Iris blatantly that their teacher only tried to find scope to touch the private parts of her body. Laura from her childhood was quite unique and she wanted to become a nun but being told that she had to cut her luxurious hair rejected the idea. Later after Iris's marriage to Richard Griffen when she was supposed to stay with them she escaped and tried to become a nun but was not accepted by the nuns. Relationship between Laura, Iris and Richard is a complicated one. Iris married Richard only to satisfy her father who thought the condition of button factory would be benefitted by Richard but it was Laura who pointed out later that it was for Richard that their father died. Though Iris tried to defend him knowing in heart what Richard had done. He did not even think it necessary to inform Iris about that news when they were in honeymoon and after that incident Richard took over Avilion and took the responsibility of Laura. Unlike Iris, Laura could not be dominated. Laura and Richard could not tolerate each other. But when Iris was informed by Laura's Head Mistress of school that she was corrupting the atmosphere of school writing an essay entitled "Does God Lie?" According to Laura God is like a radio broadcaster and we are faulty radios who cannot tune with his frequency. Laura used to bunk classes and forged the signature of Iris to produce letters that she was unwell and on asking she said she just used to wander in the city as she found classroom boring. When Iris reported about Laura's essay to Richard instead of scolding Richard trivialises the issue making Iris a little amazed. Towards the end of the novel it is revealed by Iris that she has finally realised that there was a relation between her husband and her sister. Though it is also revealed that Iris had a loveless marriage with Richard and her only duty was to close her mouth always and open her legs and she had developed an illicit relation with Alex Thomas and her daughter Aimee the legitimate child of Richard was perhaps the illegitimate child of Alex, the fact was deducted by her from the dark complexion and dark hair just like Alex.

Along with this primary narrative simultaneously runs a bizarre science fiction written by Laura and published by Iris posthumously after Laura's death. The whole novel is entitled with the name of that fiction i.e. *The Blind Assassin*. The

science fiction "The Blind Assassin" within Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* is quite different from other science fictions. In Atwood's fiction a socio-cultural history is developed throughout the narrative and the character of the blind assassin becomes the face of the oppressed that is being used by the oppressive to serve their own purpose. The girl whose tongue is cut is symbolical representative of woman who is always considered second sex and whose muteness is demanded in patriarchal society. Richard Griffen's sister Winifred plays a similar oppressive role to Iris as the dominant woman in the science fiction plays. In spite of being a woman as she aggravates the misery of the mute girl Winifred constantly humiliates Iris and holds her dominance over Richard.

The novel was written by Laura Chase in the year 1947. The novel's start with a girl who has only a single photograph of the man with whom she has an affair points out to the fact of Laura having only a single photograph of Alex Thomas which she has possessed when a reporter clicked their photo in the Button Factory picnic. From the dimension of earth the story now turns to another dimension of space as we generally find in science fiction novels. But as we gradually progress through it the veil is opened and the difference between the two dimensions of space is blurred out making the resemblance clear. The story begins with planet Zycron which was in another dimension of space with rubble strewn plain, Violet Ocean, roaming mountains and gluttonous half dead female. There lived five tribes who told almost similar stories regarding the city which was destroyed and the nameless king who was captured, hanged, cut down and buried. Men, women and children were butchered. Underneath we get a picture of this war torn world. Most interestingly all the five tribes claimed to be the victorious invaders who thought the devastation justified as the city was ruled by evil practices. The tale gets more fascinating further as the narrator developed his plot further with a masterstroke – the king cast a charm and made phantoms of the inhabitants as well as him and they were originally butchered and the actual city and people become very small and were hid in a cave beneath one the stones. The inhabitants now small as ant did not know anything of it and continued their living just as earlier.

Atwood has created a canvass where she used her brush to paint reality as well as a strange science fiction where man's physique is diminished as if seen in a convex mirror and his atrocities magnified as viewed in a concave mirror. The narrator described that Zycron had colonized Earth about eight thousand years ago and according to him we their descendants. In the city Sakiel-Norn the aristocrats were Snilferds who were skilled metalworkers. They found their gratification in court affairs, feast, and illicit relationship with one another's wife. Both the Snilferd men and women covered their face and no other except Snilferds was allowed to do this. Atwood has presented the character of the aristocrats in a dexterous way. They need to subterfuge their character and behaviour most and simultaneously they are always insecure of being befooled by others, therefore never letting others use any means to conceal their activities. The Ygniroids i.e. the smallholders, serfs and slaves were prey to the Snilferds. Their dress was shabby grey tunic with one bare shoulder and a breast which was same for the women too as they were objects of lustful sensual enjoyment for the Snilferd males. It is described by the nameless narrator to his beloved that the city owed its magnificence and power to its slave community as they had built up everything relating to trade and business on which the wealth of the city depended.

The story of Sakiel Norn was told by the nameless narrator based on the character of Alex Thomas to his lover based on Laura herself. So basically there is a narrative within a narrative within a narrative in which the character of the blind assassin emerged to become of primary concern as it is the title of the novel. In Sakiel- Norn the slave children weaved carpets which were so intricate that only the children could do such a work but the work was so tough that they became blind doing this and they were sold to brothel keepers after that. Even the price of the carpet was fixed on basis of

the numbers of children gone blind making the carpets. The whole narrative is exaggerated thus and as it is written by Laura we get a glimpse of her psychology. That Laura's psychology was quite different from others we know from Iris who while analysing the reason of Laura's death clearly said that Laura could suicide but she had her own reasons which were obviously not like those of the usual. Throughout the narrative the girl, the fictional self of Laura found the tale told by her lover as cruel and atrocious but it was Laura herself who had written such a strange a fiction where these blind children if got the chance to escape become the throat cutter, the blind assassin who could hear subtle sounds, who could walk without making any sound, who was as spry as when he cut throats it could not just be sensed. They were ruthlessly cruel and inconsiderate in the matter of murder. Yet such a blind assassin fell in love with the sacrificial virgin whose tongue was cut. Instead of murdering he rescued her but as the fiction written by Laura culminates the story of this duo remains unresolved as the nameless narrator left his lover never to return again making the girl wonder as she failed to gather the story of this blind assassin in any of the copies of the fiction published.

Atwood has shown the plight of the women to be same everywhere, even in a planet located in another dimension. In Zycron women are sacrificed, their tongue is cut, they are the sacrificial virgin though they are actually raped by the Lord of the Underworld who is none but someone from aristocrat society feigning to be the lord and testing her virginity just before they are scheduled to be sacrificed in front of all the people who will cherish this barbaric act owing to the agony of the tongue less girl who cannot even express the pain and bear it all within her heart. This muteness is immensely significant regarding the story of Iris who becomes symbolical of the mute girl and Laura who tries to deviate from conforming only to be doomed. Iris was sacrificed in the loveless marriage with Richard Griffen. She was supervised by Winifred Griffen who was just similar to the High Priestess in Zycron. As the High Priestess despite being a woman becomes a means of oppressing women so do Winifred as it is clear from Iris's contemplation that Winifred was necessary to Richard while she could always be replaced as her only duty was to shut her mouth and open her legs. Iris's condition was more severe and pathetic than the sacrificial virgin. She was reduced to a state of object which was bound to be mute and indecisive in any of her or her family's matter. The tongue of the sacrificial virgin is cut so that she cannot demand or protest or plea, Iris is diminished to the same state for sexual gratification and cultural and societal status of having a wife.

Atwood presents her bizarre ideas in the mould of science fiction. She not only is concerned about the condition of women in society but also about the relationship between man and woman. In the narrative of the greenish man in other planet the speculations on the part of the author regarding the greenish man's usage of his tentacles to love the girl intensely are queer. Among these a singular idea is that the man will transfer his intravenous fluids into the veins of the girl thus making her a greenish woman like him and together they will destroy the rich tyrannical cities and ensure freedom for innocent and virtuous poor. Throughout this novel the relation between the oppressor and the oppressed is drawn from different axis. Even if the man and woman make a joint venture to eradicate evil it is in the power of a man to decide what should be the perspective and perception of a woman; just as the greenish man infuses the fluid, the man wants to impregnate a woman not only physically but also intellectually and psychologically.

Another strange part of the novel is the episode of the Peach Women. The Peach Women in *The Blind Assassin* are representatives of the notions expected from the women in our society. They have no personal emotion. If they are hurt no blood comes out, as in this society it is demanded from women that they would not express any emotion or desire. The peach women always try to make the two men from earth to be happy but Will and Boyd ultimately feels irritated. Though is always wanted by patriarchal society that women should be devoid of any finer qualities except their effort and ability to

make them happy moulding themselves to be shameless or shy in accordance with the circumstances suitable only to men, - in this fiction it is shown that if this happens it would be devastating too as then the men like Will and Boyd would be confused whether the women pretend everything or they have become a machine. The peach women baffled them being evasive. It is shown how the notions of subduing women are completely meaningless and even not in the favour of those men who constantly want to make the women submissive.

Atwood has created various strange creatures to symbolise the atrocities and primitive instincts in man. Such an example is Xenor – the lizard man, - representatives of warmongers who want to make the inhabitants of earth their slaves.

CONCLUSIONS

Atwood has thus carefully addressed the plight of women through the socio-cultural and socio economic issues in her novel *The Blind Assassin* merging the lives of Iris, Laura in earth with the mute girl whose tongue has been cut or the peach women in unknown planets in the universe. Margaret Atwood has juxtaposed the ancient history of female extortions with the status of female in the contemporary society weaving the threads of these subtle issues with her prowess of a unique narrative skill blending the fiction and science fiction perfectly.

REFERENCE

1. Atwood, Margaret. *The Blind Assassin*. Paperback, 2000. Print
2. Cooke, Nathalie. *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion (Critical Companion to Contemporary Writers)*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004. Print
3. Wisker, Gina. *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, December 2011. Print
4. Macpherson, Slettedahl, Heidi. *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge University Press, September 2, 2010. Print

